

# VIRGINIA GAME FISH TAGGING PROGRAM



Tagging fish (mark and recapture) is one of the primary methods fishery biologists use to gather information about the migration, movement and growth of fish.

This type of information is essential to understanding the life history and population status of fish species, which, in turn, determines the need for management measures to protect fish. With the increasing effort directed toward improving marine fish stocks, this knowledge is an important key to properly managing finfish.

The Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program (VGFTP) was implemented in 1995 to provide recreational fishermen an opportunity to assist in these conservation and management efforts. This was achieved in several ways: 1) by having recreational fishermen assist in a quality-oriented tagging program; 2) by promoting catch-and-release fishing; 3) by educating anglers about proper fish handling and release techniques to reduce release mortality; and, 4) by fostering a conservation ethic which challenges saltwater fishermen to work for the protection of their resources.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

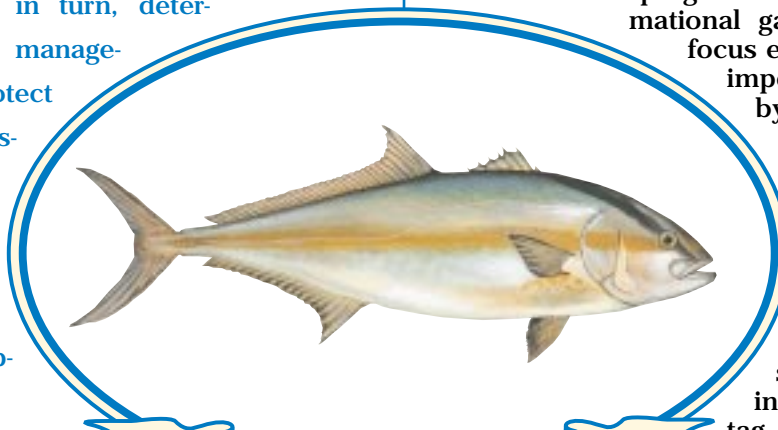
The VGFTP is a tightly focused tagging effort. The program is open to the public, but

participants are limited in number. Prospective participants, including program veterans, are required to sign-up on a "first come, first served" basis during an annual registration period. Then, prospects must attend a workshop to receive training in fish tagging, proper handling of fish, and the specific goals and operation of the VGFTP. This ensures the quality of the tagging efforts of program volunteers.

Specific species of fish are targeted, which allows the program to address specific informational gaps that exist and to focus efforts on recreationally important fish not targeted by other tagging programs. Program participants are issued both large and small tags, so they may use a tag that is suited to the size of the fish. T-bar tags, which are best suited for small fish (under 24 inches), are the primary tag type used by program participants. Participants also are issued small and large dart tags for use with larger fish.

Instruction in the proper insertion and seating for both tag types is emphasized during training sessions.

The result is a large group of trained volunteers on the water all year. They provide a cost effective means to run a continuous tagging effort for recreationally important fish and a mechanism to take advantage of special situations which may develop, such as an exceptionally strong spawn and recruitment by a particular species in a year or exceptionally large concentrations of fish in a specific area. Since they are already trained and fully equipped, large numbers of a species can be tagged by simply alerting the participants to target that species.



GREATER AMBERJACK



When on the water, be alert to the possibility that any fish you catch may possess a tag, and remember that tags come in many different sizes, shapes, styles and colors.

VGFTP volunteers have tagged more than 34,000 fish, with more than 3300 of these fish recaptured. The information generated has assisted in the fisheries management process for several species of fish. Particularly valuable information has been generated for tautog, small red drum, speckled trout, flounder and cobia.

## PROGRAM AWARDS

Recreational fishermen participating in the VGFTP earn conservation certificates by tagging a minimum of 25 fish during the year. In addition, recognition is provided to the top taggers in each of the targeted species and the tagger with the overall largest number of fish tagged and largest number of tagged fish recaptured during the year.

Fishermen who contact the VGFTP with information about tagged fish they have recaptured are awarded baseball caps and decals featuring the logo of the Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program, or, for certain species, pewter pins featuring the species caught.

## HOW TO PARTICIPATE

The VGFTP is open to the public, although the number of participants is limited. Program registration occurs in December, which enables recreational fishermen to sign up to participate for the following year. A maximum number of participants will be enlisted with approximately equal numbers coming from four geographic areas: 1) Eastern Shore; 2) Tidewater; 3) Peninsula; and 4) Middle Peninsula/Northern Neck. Anglers are selected for participation on a "first-come, first served" basis in each region. Once the maximum number of participants from a specific region is reached, additional participants from that region will be accepted only if other regions do not fill their allocation of participants.

Program participants are required to attend a workshop on tagging, fish handling techniques, and the specific goals and operation of the VGFTP. This is a fundamental element of the program, which emphasizes the quality of its tagging efforts. Four workshops are held annually during February or early March, one in each of the four program regions. Workshops, which run approximately 2-3 hours in length, are held on weekday evenings. Tagging kits, measuring boards and complete instructions are provided at no charge to volunteers attending the workshops.

Recreational fishermen interested in participation should contact:

Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament  
968 S. Oriole Drive  
Virginia Beach, VA 23451  
(757) 491-5160  
(757) 491-5172 (fax)  
mrcswt@visi.net (e-mail)

## PROGRAM SPONSORSHIP

The VGFTP is a cooperative effort of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, through the Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament, and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, through the Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program. Funding is provided by Virginia's marine recreational fishing license.

## OTHER TAGGING PROGRAMS

There are many tagging programs operating along the East Coast. Some of these programs utilize anglers in the tagging of fish, while others involve fisheries managers and members of the scientific community. In Virginia, both the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science operate tagging programs for specific species of fish.

The ultimate goal of these tagging programs is to learn more about the targeted species of fish, so better conservation and fisheries management programs can be developed. When on the water, be alert to the possibility that any fish you catch may possess a tag, and remember that tags come in many different sizes, shapes, styles and colors. When you catch a tagged fish contact the organization listed on the tag to report your catch.



## TAGGING PROGRAMS YOU MAY ASSIST

### **Boat/US Clean Water Trust**

880 S. Pickett St.  
Alexandria, VA 22304  
(703) 823-9550

Tagging efforts target amberjack, bluefish, cobia, mackerel, grouper, red drum, sea trout, snapper, striped bass, tautog, and tarpon; operates in cooperation with National Marine Fisheries Service.

### **Cooperative Game Fish Tagging Program**

National Marine Fisheries Service  
Southeast Fisheries Center  
75 Virginia Beach Drive  
Miami, FL 33149  
(305) 361-4253

Tagging efforts target tuna, billfish, and king mackerel.

### **Cooperative Shark Tagging Program**

National Marine Fisheries Service  
Narragansett Laboratory  
South Ferry Road  
Narragansett, RI 02882  
(401) 782-3320

Tagging efforts target all species of sharks except smooth and spiny dogfish.

### **The Billfish Foundation**

2051 NW 11th Street  
Miami, FL 33125  
(305) 649-8930

Tagging efforts target all species of billfish; works closely with National Marine Fisheries Service; developed a new billfish tag.

### **American Littoral Society**

Sandy Hook  
Highlands, NJ 07732  
(201) 291-0055

Tagging efforts target all marine finfish species; membership organization; data goes to National Marine Fisheries Service.

### **Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program**

968 S. Oriole Drive  
Virginia Beach, VA 23451  
(757) 491-5160

Tagging efforts target red drum, black drum, cobia, tautog, speckled trout, flounder, black sea bass, sheepshead and spadefish. Participants must register with program during annual sign-up period and participate in a training session; awards conservation certificates for top taggers. Cooperative effort of Virginia Institute of Marine Science and Virginia Marine Resources Commission.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU CATCH A TAGGED FISH

1. The most important information on a tag is the tag number. This is the key to identifying the fish, making it critical the exact tag number is recorded.

2. If you plan on releasing the fish and want to leave the tag in the fish, write down the correct tag number immediately. The value of a tagged fish is greatly enhanced if it is recaptured two or more times, providing a "road map" of its movements over a period of time. If you do not have the means (pen and paper) to write down the tag number and plan to release the fish, remove (cut off) the tag and keep it. Do not depend upon your memory to remember the tag number; an error in remembering even one digit of a tag number will render the recapture of the tagged fish worthless. If it is legal to keep the fish and you decide to keep it, remove the tag for reporting purposes.

3. Measure and record the total and fork length of the fish. If you do not have a measuring device, estimate the length of the fish. Also, measure or estimate the weight of the fish.

4. Record the species of fish, date of the catch, and exact location of the catch. Record any other information about the fish which might be important, for example, any

wounds, unusual markings, or observations about the condition of the tag and place on the body of the fish where the tag was located.

5. Contact the office of the tagging program issuing the tag and supply them with this information. The telephone number of the tagging program issuing the tag will appear on the tag. If the tag was issued by the Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program, if you have a problem reading the tag and determining the proper agency to contact regarding a recapture, or if you need any help reporting the capture of a tagged fish, contact:

Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program  
c/o Virginia Saltwater  
Fishing Tournament  
968 S. Oriole Drive  
Virginia Beach, VA 23451  
(757) 491-5160

6. When you report the recapture of a tagged fish, you will receive information about the fish (when and where it was tagged; size when it was tagged). If the tag was issued by the Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program, you will receive a cap and decal featuring the program's logo, or, for certain species of fish, a pewter pin featuring the fish you caught.





## HANDLING AND RELEASING FISH PROPERLY

Participation in recreational fishing is motivated by many different desires and goals, including catching fish, catching trophy-size fish, enjoying outdoor activities on the water, participating in special activities (tournaments, tagging programs, children's fishing and educational clinics, and many others), and being with friends and family in pleasing surroundings. Increasingly, catch and release fishing is becoming a part of recreational fishing as regulations require the release of certain sizes and species of fish, and recreational fishermen derive pleasure from seeing healthy fish return to the water. The importance of the social, environmental and educational motivations for releasing fish is growing among recreational fishermen, as they realize their role as stewards of fishery resources and enjoy their contribution. Learning the proper ways to release fish is an important part of this process.

**1. Plan Ahead.** Be prepared to release fish before you leave the dock or venture out on the beach or a pier. Use tackle that is strong enough to land fish quickly, minimizing the stress they endure and to prevent exhaustion. Set hooks quickly to minimize the opportunity for fish to swallow hooks. When practical, use barbless hooks and bend down the barbs on hooks to make removing the hooks less damaging. Learn about circle hooks for fishing with bait, and use them; they dramatically reduce "gut-hooked" fish and may increase

the effectiveness of your fishing. Use artificial baits and avoid the use of treble hooks.

**2. Use the Right Equipment.** Have needlenose pliers, forceps and/or other tools for the removal of hooks from deeply hooked fish readily available. Remove hooks when they are embedded in the mouth, lips, or other hard parts of a fish's mouth or throat. When a fish is hooked deeply in a soft body part (stomach, for example), cut the line or leader as close to the hook or fish's mouth as possible and leave it. Never pull, jerk or rip a hook out of a fish; this will cause significant injuries to the fish.

**3. Minimize Handling.** Handle fish gently, but firmly to prevent them from excessive "flopping" around, which can cause injuries. Never handle a fish by its eyes or gills! Use a wet cotton towel or wet cotton gloves when handling small fish; this will minimize the loss of protective "slime" and protect their skin. Large fish are best released by leaving them in the water and removing the hook. If you bring a large fish on board, use a large landing net; never use a gaff.

**4. The Right Release.** Return fish to the water carefully. Hold them upright, close to the water, and gently guide them into the water head first. A fish that is exhausted, unresponsive or stressed should be revived by moving it forward through the water until its gills are working vigorously and it is ready to swim away under its own power.

